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Ghani Khan: The Poet-Painter (1914-1996)

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Abstract

Khan Abdul Ghani Khan (1914-1996) was the son of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as Bacha Khan (1890-1988) who was a political activist. Unlike his father and his brother, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, Ghani Khan was a poet, painter and sculptor par excellence. Although he is well known as a poet both nationally and internationally, very few people are aware that he was as great a painter and a sculptor, too. In this short paper, I try to present Ghani Khan as a multi-faceted personality neither whose paintings are 'dumb poetry' nor whose poems are 'blind paintings' (Richter & Wells, 2008-188). I have also included illustrations of some of his paintings and sculptures for the interest of the readers.

Keywords: Ghani Khan, Pakistani artists, Pukhtun personalities, poet-painter

“And if you, O Poet, tell a story with your pen,
the painter with his brush can tell it more easily.
If you call painting dumb poetry, the painter may call poetry blind painting.
Consider then which is the more grievous defect, to be blind or dumb?”
(Richter & Wells 2008:188)

Ghani Khan: The Poet-Painter

Michelangelo (1475-1564), the Renaissance artist, was perhaps the earliest figure in the history of visual arts who was equally seasoned in painting, sculpture and poetry, and in the following centuries there had been, of course, many people with alike personality of poet-painter, such as Rembrandt (1606-69) and William Blake

(1757-1827), and that the one who was born in the Indian Sub-continent was Tagore (1861-1941); long been recognized for his literary contributions¹, who enjoyed not only literature but also painting, sculpture and music. The next descendant of this caste was Abdul Ghani Khan (1914-96), the elder son the Red-Shirt leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Bacha Khan (1890-1988). Though the early chapters of his life were devoted to politics, he like his teacher, Rabindranath Tagore, has natural ability in exhibiting his dexterity in poetry, prose, painting and sculpture with such a generosity and devotion that painting may rival his position of fame as poet, or his poems are not ordinary competitors of his prose. Yet alive to 'the marvelous manifestations of nature' and a great love for his people, the Pukhtuns (Khan 1988:1), he could hear voices of the invisible cosmos; his eyes were constantly open to see his dignity visible in an ordinary man, very close to him; and he could speak well of his ideals not alien to his curiosity. This position makes us believe in that he was neither dumb nor blind.

Ghani Khan, a restive artist, had a multifaceted personality. He has always been acknowledged as a great poet of international note among his contemporaries, because almost every Pakhtun around the world has enjoyed his poetry in songs sung by renowned singers of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Historians who survey on the War of Freedom of Indo-Pakistan are well-aware of his role as a *Pukhtun Zalmay* (Pukhtun Youth).² Among the literary communities, he has the position of a great writer who wrote in Pashtu, Urdu and English.³ But this should be remembered that Ghani Khan was quite lucid in visual arts before and after he was a poet and writer; which is not so widely known abroad. At this point, one may naturally expect the poet-painter's influences where a small amount of evidences approve this connection, and to treat both is further a pressing job. A little, however, must be said in the support. The offspring of his visual and literary imagery, in my opinion, are not of a single creative impulse. Even so, both of these were not strange to his surroundings, and that the subject matter of his pen and brush share many with each others, but each of them demonstrates a unique and individual character in its own right. In fact Ghani Khan never missed even a single chance to express himself excluding the difference of mode from time to time. While speaking of his method of painting he says: "if it is not done in one go, my mode changes, and I start writing instead." On the ground of his thinking, "poetry and painting are imperative sources of expression".⁴ The quality of illustration is thus lacking but he has transfigured ideas from poetry to painting is rather rational for his art.

Born in the year⁵ 1914, Ghani Khan received very little training in visual arts. Though he since his childhood used to draw pictures (Khan 1990) but the earliest impression available for the present study does not exceed his self-portrait of the

1940s. Perhaps he was away from his home; for about ten years since 1929, and the works he created were lost in the mists of time. In February 1934, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) enrolled him and Indira Priyadarshini (1917-1984) in Shantiniketan⁶ where Ghani Khan along with Journalism⁷ studied Sculpture and Painting while Indira took to study Chemistry, History, English, Drawing and Painting. Here in the school, Tagore and Nandlal Bose (1882-1966) taught him painting, Ramkinkar Baij⁸ (1906-1980) honed his skills in sculpture, and in Journalism he remained under the guidance of Krishna Kripalani⁹ (1907-1992). However, he could not complete his study because his father did not want him to be a painter or sculptor and withdrew him from Shantiniketan in October 1934.¹⁰

Under the guidance of these cerebral personalities at Shantiniketan, Ghani Khan has always been acknowledged his stay there, and this was the very effect of that institution that he named his residence as 'Dār-ul-Amān'¹¹ i.e. Shantiniketan; the Abode of Peace. He was always proud of his people and used to say that all these I have learned there. According to his statement "It was in the Shantiniketan that I discovered myself and the past greatness of my own culture and civilization which has produced several men of versatile genius, who have been appreciated by historians and scholars of the West." By looking closely at the works in both these sister arts; poetry and painting, there are significant features and themes very similar in the choice of subject, and that one can seek testimonies for the above statement.

During his apprenticeship, he adopted Western themes such as Adam and Eve and a big full-figure statue of a Prophet,¹² but later in his career he confined himself only to expose his own people and culture. He always tried to bring forth the real face and character¹³ of what he was concerned about; the most appealing point for discussion and a favorite subject for both his writings and pictures. He could see everything in the face of his model what he wanted, and this was the decisive factor that made Ghani Khan as a portrait artist.

He painted only faces and sculpted simply heads of his models. Those who are interested to know about his ideals and family circle, certainly, can find many faces of his friends, family members and relatives in his art like an album in the hand. He was much fascinated by the facial expressions and used to say that 'this is the most important part of human body which reflects all the sentiments of human beings.' In this way he strived to portray expressions and was in the opinion that 'the most difficult task in depicting portraits is expressions of the sitter and to show its feelings through face' (Khan 1990). Always concerned for the age, emotions and expressions of his model, his portraits reveal human responses and attitudes. For instance, in the three successive portraits of his son,

Faridoon Khan (1951-87), Ghani has shown the very nature of his model. The earliest of these was sketched (in 1956) when his son was about six years old. In this the big naughty eyes, cute smile, and twisted hair expose the childish features; unaware of all worries. Two years later (in 1958) he posed him again, but now his model was not a naughty boy. Yet for another two years interval, he painted him once more (in 1960) and this time he showed him in a serious mode. Something of the same can be commented about Ghani's other paintings and sketches. Save this, he was well-veteran in characterization that exhibits his realistic approach in visualization. Inversely, in poetry, with a little exception, these characters; such as the Six Lions and the Seven Flowers written to eulogize his friends when he was in Haripur Jail (Khan 1985:69, 74), or many poems entitled with animals' or birds' names; like the toad, mouse, woodpecker, fly etc., (*Ibid* pp. 50, 52, 59, 67) are ironic or symbolic in representation.

Another point to be taken for comparison is the style and way of working. Ghani Khan was an impatient man and could not wait long. The artist should say briefly to his listener or viewer, was perhaps his motto. He addressed to his listeners and viewers so frankly as 'gossip in the Hujra'. Like his extemporary style in poetry, simplicity governs almost in all portraits but his figures seem dramatic in conception. He has chosen mediums and techniques that suited the nature of his mode. Worked in the oils, watercolours, and crayons; however, he preferred pastels that provided him an opportunity in transferring his 'brief but intensive' impression in a short time. He worked quickly and deftly, and whenever he got an idea, picked a charcoal from the kitchen, children's coloured pencils or pastels, and visualized his theme on an ordinary support like a cardboard, rough paper or whatever he could find.¹⁴ At time he also mixed crayons with other mediums to create a tonal depth and pleasing texture in the picture. Most often background was painted in watercolour without mounting his paper on board which resulted wrinkles in his paintings. Again this was due to his mode where filling background with watercolour was easier than charcoal or pastels, while his oil paintings can be counted on fingers. He seems to be inspired by impressionist palette, such as, in the *Woman in Black* (1970s), the features seem to be exaggerated and her black costume is treated in shades of dark purple and blues rather than black complimenting with yellow background (Khan 2008b). The application of complimentary colours side by side, Ghani Khan was intending to "bring intensity and luminosity in figures. The tinny strokes on dark and buff surface of the paper accentuated the bone structure here and create a highlight there" (Hussain 1993).

To judge Ghani's skill and a full command over line, his linear drawings are best to exemplify the awkward simplicity in depiction. Though these are few in number but speak with greater clarity and force, and are full of movement.

Quoting his early days of practice at Shantiniketan, his tutor in drawing did not allow him to use eraser (Khan 1990), and since then he never used it in the rest of his life. The advantage of such practice made him so confident that he never afraid of his strokes while working, nor did he feel these incorrect. Once he dragged a line on the surface it became a permanent part of his drawing. Thus one can easily realize all movements of his hands (Khan 2008b). This ability also stemmed in his personality. He never apologized for what he did or said with his pen, brush or chisel. In the preface of Ghani's book *Palwashey* (beams of light), Gul Bacha Ulfat says that "because of his frank and fanatical manner he can speak where others hesitate to dare" (Khan 1985:673).

According to critics (Ibid pp. 672ff), Ghani Khan's poetry conveys the message of love, beauty, frolic and the Pukhtunwali (Pukhtun's code of honour). In this connection there are numerous poems that demonstrate the degree of relationship between his verses and images. To generalize a group of portraits we can characterize his figures having features like the sensuous thin lips, tapered nose, glimmering eyes, elongated face, long napes, and looped hair. His self-portraits, imaginary figures, and family portraits are poetically expressed; such as, these lines from his poem 'the Entreat' are suggesting:

Nor I need your thin lips,
Nor hair in loops like a serpent's coils,
Nor a nape as graceful as swan's,
Nor narcissus eyes full of drunkenness,
Nor teeth as perfect as pearls of heaven,
Nor the cheeks ruddy and full as pomegranates,
Nor a voice mellifluous as a sarinda,
Nor a figure as elegant as poplar,...
(Khan 1985:136)

At Shantiniketan artists and sculptors were engaged in depicting scenes and images of their culture; mostly Indian, but for Ghani the role model was his own people. His teacher Ramkinkar erected statues of Rabindranath Tagore (1961) and Mahatma Gandhi (1968) there and Ghani Khan created sculptures of his father, Bacha Khan, and uncle Dr. Khan Sahib (Abdul Jabbar Khan) here. He executed these sculptures with great devotion and unconscious sincerity which disclose his regards for his father and also a keen interest in plastic art; because he had greater affinity to sculpture rather than two-dimensional art. This is what his sculptures, unlike his paintings, are more realistic in approach and tried his best to capture the likeness of his models. The same dedication is also evident through sensory details in the portrait of Bacha Khan which characterizes the face of a true Pukhtun leader

worried for his people. The portrait seems to be a later work and expresses the fact that during this time (1962) he has gained a full command on his art. Yet, his habit of working quickly he has chosen wood, clay and plaster for modeling and never carved in stone which was not always accessible to him.

Eluding from any complexity and seeking the most striking comparison between poems and pictures we could have only one artwork to serve; the Kochay (a favorite dog of Ghani Khan). One might expect that this delicate charcoal drawing was either inspired by his poem or the artist has provided exegesis to his picture. However, this intricacy is resolved by the creator. In his poem with the same title and subject matter, Ghani Khan has contextualized the poem in a note that when he was in jail, Kochay died (Khan 1985:56), but in the drawing his dog is not dead. In scrutinizing his poetry and painting on the same line, we must familiar with the exchange of titles among both. In 1994 he painted two versions of an imaginary portrait, Tora Laila that shows his fellow feeling towards poetry into painting. The subject is typical poetic but the face is defending sensation of his characteristic beauty and shunning the concept of Arabic standards.

The legacy of his own culture was primary motivation to his art. He loved everything he had in his surrounding even included trees, flowers, rustic people, animals and above all the nature.¹⁵ All these were not only the subject of his poetry but also have their respective place in his visual arts. If we count his art pieces¹⁶, these will exceed the number of his poems. In search of the past glory of his people his visual journey started from the portrait of his little son to the sketches of ordinary figures of his village through a man he called him 'the Great Pukhtun'; Bacha Khan. However, he was still on his move reached the point by portraying the Christ and Buddha. The timeline of his works falls in several periods that carry out a variety of trends in manifestation, but in all its variety, the goal and purpose has always been remained constant: the external reality with translation of internal veracity.

But why his poetry is superior to painting? The answer is simple. That poetry uses language where the words instruct minds, and they are universal in meaning. On the other hand, visual arts are always tied to the particular. In a society where Ghani had judged the oddity of his people that "he [the Pukhtun] loves music but has a great contempt for the musician" (Khan 1958:5), and thus his pen wins a noble position than his brush.

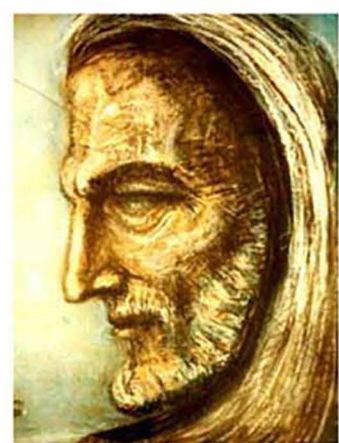
Notes

- 1 He is the winner of Nobel Prize in literature.
- 2 Ghani Khan was not much agreed with his father's philosophy of 'Non-Violence' and consequently established a group of Pukhtun youths; carrying firearms in their hands, in April 1947 to protect the unarmed followers of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement.
- 3 Besides his poem collections, he wrote *The Pathan* (English) (1958); first published by Pushto Adabi Society, Islamabad in 1947, *Khan Sahib* in Urdu (1994), and number of essays and articles scattered in renowned magazines; most prolific contribution of which is the writings with the title of *Gadey Wadey* (stuff and nonsense) written with the pen name of *Lewanay Palsafi* (Insane Philosopher). These writings were both in prose and poems discussing the socio-political and moral issues in a humorous column published in *Monthly the Pukhtun* from 1928-1947.
- 4 He utilized his art purely for the expression of his inner sense which is more visible in his visual arts rather than his prose and poetry. It is why he did not remember the titles and dates of many of his paintings and sketches.
- 5 The year of his birth varies in writings; such as 1913 (Ekbal 2009:69), 1914 (Gupta 2006:782; Eswaran 2009:78), and rarely 1915 (Khan 1990), but the events around his birth secure the date as 1914.
- 6 Shantiniketan was founded by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore in 1863 for meditation and quiet study in the forest. Later on, in 1901, it was developed into a school for boys by Rabindranath Tagore; his son, and in 1921 it was expanded into Visva-Bharati University.
- 7 He joined Journalism classes in the English Department, but he was not satisfied with this because he was given a subject to write and after having done he had nothing to do. At this he asked his teacher "What should I do next?" and he was answered "Anything you like". Thus he fed up of this routine activity and answer, and found an ease in the sculpture class. See Omer Khan (May 19, 1990).
- 8 Regarded as the Pioneer of Modern Indian Sculpture, Ramkinkar Baij worked in expressionist style. In 1929 he obtained Diploma from Kala Bhavana (Shantiniketan) and next year joined the same as a part-time teacher. After a short depart from the institute he came back but this time as a permanent teacher, and later on, in 1969, he became the Head of the Department of Sculpture. Besides his sculptures, he also painted in oil and watercolour, and also worked in theater. His famous works include the concrete sculpture of *Santhal Family* (1938), cast sculpture *Head of a Woman*

(1939), freestanding sculpture Lampstand (1940), statues of Rabindranath Tagore (1961) and Mahatma Gandhi (1968) in direct concrete.

- 9 Kripalani began his career as a teacher in Shantiniketan and from 1933 to 1941 he edited the journal, *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*; remained the first Secretary of Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters, India) from 1954-71; nominated as member of Indian Parliament from 1974-80; and Chairman of National Book Trust, India from 1981-86. Among his publications are *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (1962); *Modern India, Rammohun to Rabindranath Tagore* (1965); *Gandhi, the Modern Mhatama* (1968); *Modern Indian Literature* (1968) etc.
- 10 When his father, Bacha Khan, visited Shantiniketan in August 31, 1934 (Tagore, R. & Das, S. K 2006: 1002; fn 59) he saw his son's pre-occupation in painting which he did not consider to be of any worth in the ongoing struggles against British Rule in India.
- 11 Dār-ul-Amān, the residence of Ghani Khan built in 1944, is located in a small town in District Charsadda, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (34°14'4 N, 71°50'20 E). The house is a unique treasury of art ranging paintings and drawings covered every wall and pillar, numerous sculptures in the windowsills by Ghani Khan, and cultural material of Pukhtuns.
- 12 He conversed that this statue is placed in the Shantiniketan Museum. See Omer Khan's Interview with Ghani Khan (May 19, 1990).
- 13 His book *the Pathan* (1958) is the best example never revealed by someone else the true character of a Pukhtun, his culture and society.
- 14 It was quiet shocking for me when I saw that a class quality handmade watercolour paper was used for rough charcoal drawing; depicting Rahman Baba, and another time a very ordinary paper used for a delicate portrait of Bahram Khan (1984).
- 15 His residence, Dār-ul-Amān, is abundant of all kinds of trees and flowers like a forest, but he never allow anybody to cut its trunks and permitted these to grow in its natural tendency. This was the extreme of his love for nature.
- 16 There are hundreds of artworks in Dār-ul-Amān and the same number with his relatives who appreciated him, and Ghani Khan gifted them. These need a proper and professional conservation. Mashal Khan (1979-) refused to give these collection to Ghani Dherai (a memorial of Ghani Khan built in 2002 at Takht Bhai Road, Charsadda); though some photographed replicas are exhibited there, because of not sure of proper placement. In March 2011, I visited the site and found the roof of building was seriously damaged, and the scene reminded me Mashal's words.

Illustrations



Bacha Khan, 1962, pastel on paper.



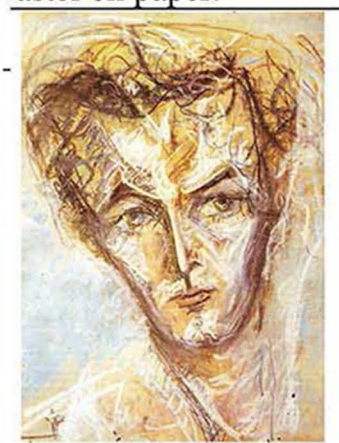
Jan Nisar, 1970s Pastel and wash on paper.



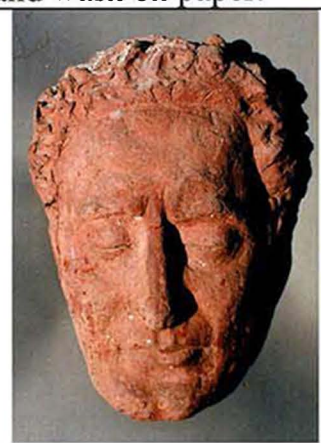
Faridoon Khan 1956, brown chalk on paper.



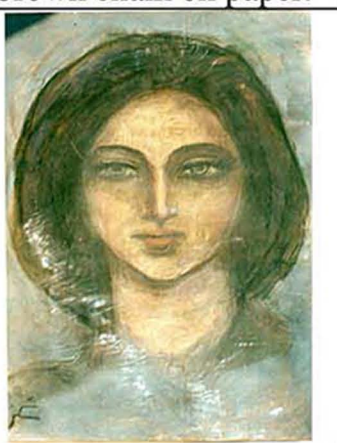
Faridoon Khan 1958, pastel on paper.



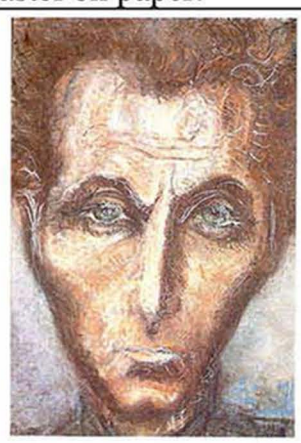
Faridoon Khan 1970s, pastel on paper.



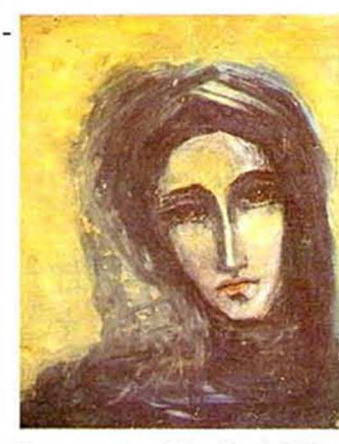
Self-portrait, terracotta (baked clay).



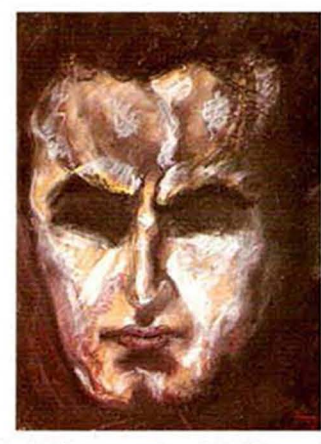
Nagina, 1974, pastel and wash on paper.



Melancholy, 1961, pastel on paper.



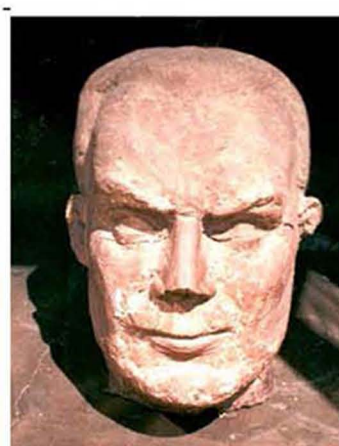
Voman in Black, 1970s, Watercolour on paper.



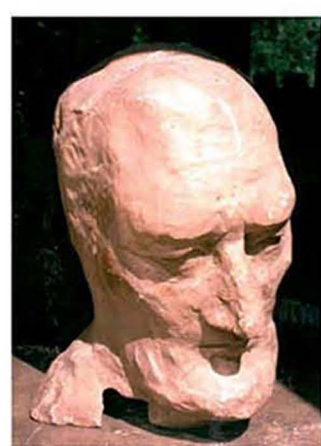
Self Portrait, 1970s, oil on canvas.



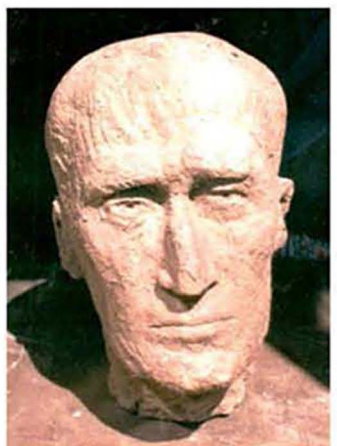
Kochay (Ghani's Dog), charcoal and white chalk on paper.



Dr. Khan Sahib, plaster.



Bacha Khan, plaster.



Firdous Khan, plaster.



Lamppost, 1970s, wood.

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